Famed Scout Camp Threatened by Public, Private Budget Crisis

by Anne Schwartz
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Anne Schwartz Boats on Lake Ohrbach

On a freezing Saturday in January, six troops of Boy Scouts camped out in cabins next to a silvery lake forming a skin of ice, surrounded by dense stands of bare trees as far as the eye could see. The boys, who had come from New York City and the surrounding suburbs to learn how to make a fire and use an ax while building lifelong values and friendships, might have been in a forest in the Catskills. The actual location: Staten Island.

They were spending the weekend at 143-acre Pouch Camp , the largest parcel within the Staten Island Greenbelt and one of the only privately owned ones. All together, the greenbelt preserves 2,800 contiguous acres of parks, natural areas and golf courses under city and state ownership in a teardrop-shaped swath of green at the island's center. The camp is beloved by generations of Boy Scouts throughout the metropolitan region whose childhoods revolved around weekends and summers there, as well as by Staten Islanders who grew up exploring the adjacent woods, fishing in its Lake Ohrbach, and attending dances and parties at its picturesque lodge.

But now, the financially troubled Greater New York Councils, Boy Scouts of America , the owner of the camp, has announced it is considering putting the land up for sale. If funds can't be found to save the camp, luxury housing could replace lean-tos, eliminating scout camping programs within New York City and diminishing the Greenbelt forever.

Funds for Land

For a number of years, the Greater New York Councils has been in discussions about selling a conservation easement (essentially the development rights) on the property to the city, state or an environmental group. Such a sale would preserve the landscape while allowing the scouts to retain ownership and continue its camping program. Press reports put the most recent asking price for an easement at $30 million. Talks appeared to stall, though, and just before Thanksgiving, the Boy Scout organization said that it was exploring the sale of all or part of the property.

Although land use issues are often contentious in Staten Island, politicians from both sides of the aisle, local scout volunteers, and environmental and civic groups have been working together to find a way to save the land and the camp program in the most difficult economic climate in decades. .

The Pouch Camp situation is a perfect example of why state legislatures, including New York's, have created dedicated accounts to provide a steady stream of funding for conservation and other environmental needs, advocates say. Although spending on conservation is minuscule compared to other areas, it is often perceived as expendable and so is among the first things cut by governments looking to save money.

In New York state, the Environmental Protection Fund, financed largely by a portion of the receipts from the real estate transfer tax, was created so there would be a stable source of money to preserve land and fund other environmental projects. In recent years, the state has used money from this source (and a now-depleted bond act) to preserve open space in Staten Island and elsewhere in the city. Pouch Camp is listed on the state's Open Space Conservation Plan as a priority for preservation in New York City .

State legislation passed in 2007 called for increasing the fund to $300 million by 2010, and last year's budget allocated $222 million, with $60 million for land conservation. But governors and legislators find it difficult to resist raiding the fund to balance the budget and have "borrowed"

$500 million in recent years. Now, the state is facing an $8.2 billion deficit, and the governor wants to sweep more money from the fund for unrelated purposes; slash allocations from the fund by a third -- one of the largest cuts to any major program; and place a moratorium on all land conservation purchases.

Lean-tos in the woods Anne Schwartz

Over the years, the city has preserved much of the greenbelt as parkland, and Mayor Michael Bloomberg has staked his legacy on greening the city, setting aside capital dollars for parks under PlaNYC2030 . In a recent letter to Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, New Yorkers for Parks , the citywide parks advocacy group, asked the parks department to incorporate the camp property into its system. But the city has its own fiscal difficulties and has reduced capital budgets by 30 percent. Benepe told the New York Times that it was highly unlikely that the parks department would be able to buy the property.

Nature's Last Stand

The Greenbelt is a link to Staten Island's not-so-distant rural past, before the tsunami of development unleashed by the opening of the Verrazano Bridge in 1964. Efforts to create the linear park began in the 1960s, with the purchase of what is now High Rock Park and a years-long battle by civic and conservation groups to prevent Robert Moses from blasting a highway through the borough's hilly wooded center.

There are now seven city parks in the Greenbelt, as well as parcels the state owns or protects through conservation easements. Thirty-five miles of hiking trails meander through its woods, meadows and wetlands. One of the largest natural areas in New York City, it supports a diversity of native flora and fauna, including 50 species of nesting birds as well as 150 species of birds that migrate through the city along the Atlantic flyway in the spring and fall.

Within the greenbelt, Pouch Camp is considered the crown jewel. While it is not open to the

public (although fishing permits are issued and hikers can request permission to walk through), trails through the greenbelt run along its edge, overlooking the camp's native hardwood forest and understory dotted with glacial kettle ponds, streams and swamps. "In the spring, it is beautiful because of all the different wildflowers," said Dominick D'Urso, who leads the annual 10-mile greenbelt hike for Protectors of Pine Oak Woods , the borough's 30-year-old land conservation organization.

"It's the heart and soul and lungs of the greenbelt," said Kathleen Vorwick, president of the Greenbelt Conservancy , a nonprofit that partners with the parks department in operating and supporting the park. Just a ferry and bus ride from Manhattan, that part of the greenbelt is "the last remaining area of that size in New York City where people can be totally away from noise and light pollution," she said.

"It's someplace that's very, very special. You have to see it to believe it exists in New York City," said Staten Island Borough President James P. Molinaro .

The Cost of Development

Most of Pouch Camp is not suitable for housing, with its steep slopes, lake and numerous streams and wetlands. But building on even part of the property would fragment the native forest and put luxury housing in the wildest part of the greenbelt.

Development would fray the ecological fabric of parkland well beyond the camp's borders. Slicing the forest into smaller pieces and increasing the amount of "edge" would make the entire greenbelt less habitable for native animals that need larger areas of interior forest to survive. Construction, roads and houses, along with lawns and gardens, would give invasive species a foothold and affect the larger watershed: .Heavy rains and snowmelt would wash soil, pesticides and other pollutants into Lake Ohrbach, which floods into streams and wetlands in High Rock Park below and on down through Richmondtown and into Richmond Creek.

"The concept of this 2,800-acre greenbelt, mostly in a natural state, would just be destroyed. It would be cut into little boxes," said Vorwick. "There's a very small piece of God's creation here on central Staten Island, and it would be destroyed if any portion of Pouch Camp were to be developed."

To many Staten Islanders, especially people involved in scouting, closing the camp would be the biggest loss of all. The camp is heavily used -- both for summer camps and weekend activities year round -- by many of the 52,000 Boy Scouts in the metropolitan region as well as troops from other parts of the country who stay there while they explore New York City. There is also a summer YMCA day camp on the grounds.

"My fondest scouting memories from my childhood are all based around Camp Pouch," said Jim Falcone, the cubmaster at Pack 36 on Staten Island, whose father was also scoutmaster. "It gives kids a real sense of adventure to be out there. I was born and raised in Bensonhurst. My dad took us camping there and I didn't even realize that it was just a stone's throw over the bridge. It's where my kids slept outside in a tent the first time. Every one of my sons caught their first fish in Lake Ohrbach."

Breaking with Tradition?

People involved in scouting on Staten Island say the sale of the camp would betray the Boy Scout's 100-year tradition of building skills, character and values in young men through camping, nature study and outdoor adventure and its goal of teaching youths to be good stewards of the environment. "Selling the camp goes against Boy Scout values," said Dominic R. DeRubbio, an Eagle Scout and public safety consultant who helped organize a rally attended by 1,500 people on a chilly December evening and a petition drive that has collected more than 10,000 signatures so far.

The proposed sale has increased scrutiny of the expenses of the Greater New York Councils, which has its offices in the Empire State Building. It has also renewed criticism of the Boy Scouts of America's corporate-style management and high salaries for a nonprofit.

Assemblymembers Michael Cusick and Louis Tobacco held a press conference in early February suggesting that the organization lower costs by moving its headquarters to Staten Island. According to the Staten Island Advance, financial filings show that in 2008 the organization paid $2 million for occupancy costs, much of it in rent.

"We have made drastic reductions, reduced staff by 40 percent, reduced office space by 60 percent, driving down operating costs dramatically," said William Kelly, spokesman for the Greater New York Councils. "We are looking at all of the assets to figure out the best way to

remain relevant to scouts in New York City." He noted that the organization operates three camping facilities, including one upstate and one in Alpine, N.J., across the George Washington Bridge from the city, with Pouch being the smallest.

Elsewhere in the country, Boy Scout councils have been criticized for logging or selling off forested camps to developers in disregard for the environment, according to a scathing investigative report last year by Hearst newspapers. The Boy Scouts of America, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this month, responded with a public letter saying, in part, "local executive boards have the duty to use all council assets in the best interests of scouting -- which might include the sale of properties," to support its mission of preparing young people "to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes."

Looking for a Savior

In terms of Pouch Camp, Kelly said that the Greater New York Councils has brought in the international commercial real estate firm Jones Lang LaSalle to figure out "the best way to use that property in the best interest of New York City kids."

"We want to have a conservation easement that preserves the ownership to the Greater New York Councils, with the primary purpose being scouting programs," he said. "If an easement isn't going to be worked out, other options include a full or partial sale."

Discussions of public ownership of Pouch Camp go back as far as 1985, as documents posted on the Save William H. Pouch Scout Camp website show.

Most recently, the Greater New York Councils had been in discussions with The Trust for Public Land, the national land conservation organization that helps negotiate land preservation deals with the ultimate goal of transferring the property to public ownership. In New York City, the organization has helped protect nearly 620 acres of open space, including Staten Island's Mt. Loretto in 2000.

Leslie Wright, director of the New York State program at The Trust for Public Land, said the group would "like to do everything we can that's reasonable to preserve" Pouch Camp. "It's a beautiful piece of property. It has a huge natural resource value, both in terms of itself and how it links up with other protected properties," Wright said.

The Staten Island Advance reported on two proposals to save the camp -- a complicated land swap involving the adjacent Richmond County Country Club or using mitigation funding from the proposed expansion of the New York Container Terminal into Arlington Marsh on the North Shore -- but both face a number of objections.

Borough President Molinaro said, "We are researching every possibility of saving it in every possible way you can think of." He continued, "Every elected official on Staten Island, regardless of political philosophy or affiliation, is working together and knows it is a necessity to save Pouch Camp, and I am confident that we will save it."

In the meantime, environmental groups are lobbying to keep state funding for the environment, parks and land conservation. They argue that investing in the environment pays dividends in clean water and air, quality of life, public health and economic benefits and jobs in tourism, recreation, and natural resource management.

"Americans, and New Yorkers, understand that economic growth and conservation are mutually reinforcing goals," said Paul Hartman, director of government relations for The Nature Conservancy in New York, in testimony before a joint legislative hearing on Gov. David Paterson's proposed budget. He cited recent polling by The Nature Conservancy showing that voters strongly support public investment in protecting natural areas, support that has held steady despite the economic downturn.

Advocates for conservation funding point out that the recession offers a rare opportunity to acquire lands important for watershed protection, wildlife and recreation. "Halting land purchases that protect public health and drinking water when prices are at their lowest and there are willing sellers is, at best, unwise," wrote Assemblymember Steve Englebright of Long Island, chair of the Assembly Committee on Tourism, Parks, Arts and Sports Development, in a letter published in the Albany Times Union.

"Parks even in New York City have always been the low man on the totem pole, I guess because people perceive them as discretionary," said Vorwick. “But to a lot of people they aren’t discretionary -- they are the only outlet you have for recreation. To spend millions of dollars fighting childhood obesity and then cut your parks budget makes no sense."

Staten Islanders have fought long and hard to preserve the swath of green in the middle of the island. In the current economic crisis, can the city or state can find a way to save the last, most crucial piece?

"If you lose it, you’re not getting this back, especially in New York City," Molinaro warned. "It’s irreplaceable."

Anne Schwartz, in charge of the parks topic page since its inception in 1999, is a journalist who specializes in environmental issues.